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Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 29 (2011) 1797 – 1806

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

International Conference on Education and Educational Psychology (ICEEPSY 2011)

Teachers' Use of Preemptive versus Reactive Focus on Form**Across Proficiency Levels**Mahnaz Saiedi^{a*}, Parvin Safay Mohseny^b*a,b Department of English Language, Tabriz Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tabriz, Iran***Abstract**

This study involved the observation of communicatively oriented classroom activities and the identification and analysis of incidental language related episodes (LREs) in teacher-learner interaction in an Iranian EFL context. The objective of the study was to investigate how frequently different types of focus on form, in general, and preemptive and reactive types, in particular, are used by teachers in different student proficiency levels. Three teachers and 90 students participated in this study. The findings, based on independent samples t-tests, revealed no significant difference in the frequency of focus on form episodes, including preemptive and reactive types, between two proficiency levels.

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Selection and/or peer-review under responsibility of Dr Zafer Bekirogullari.

Keywords: Focus on form; Incidental focus on form; Preemptive focus on form; Reactive focus on form; Language Related Episodes (LREs)

1. Introduction

Incidental focus on form is important pedagogically because it may facilitate the investigation of attention to form and meaning (Long & Robinson, 1998) and encourage learners to notice linguistic forms (Schmidt, 2001). Previous studies have explored the general question of how frequently these techniques are used in meaning based classes and how different they are in this quantity. They attributed some of these differences to learners. It is suggested that learners' proficiency level can make differences (Baleghzadeh, 2010; Williams, 1999).

There have been a vast number of studies over reactive focus on form (e.g., Doughty & Williams, 1998; Saiedi, 2009). Most of these studies focused on how teachers correct their students' linguistic mistakes, the so called reactive focus on form or corrective feedback. As far as teachers or their learners can raise attention to language through preemptive focus on form, therefore, there is also a necessity to examine preemptive as well as reactive episodes (Ellis, Basturkmen & Loewen, 2001b, 2002; Farrokhi & Gholami, 2007).

This study involves the observation of communicatively oriented classroom activities, identification and analysis of incidental language related episodes (LREs) in teacher learner interaction. The prime objective is to investigate how frequently different types of focus on form, including preemptive and reactive focus on form, are used by

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teachers in different proficiency levels of students. The following research questions were proposed to meet the objectives of this study.

1. Is there a difference in L2 teachers' use of focus on form across different proficiency levels of learners (pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate)?
2. Is there a difference in L2 teachers' use of reactive focus on form across different proficiency levels of learners (pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate)?
3. Is there a difference in L2 teachers' use of preemptive focus on form across different proficiency levels of learners (pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate)?

2. Theoretical Background

Explicit or implicit ways of teaching is still one of the most critical choices that a teacher should make (Long & Robinson, 1998). As it is classified by Wilkins (1976, as cited in Long & Robinson, 1998) there are two main approaches in language teaching known as synthetic and analytic approaches. In the first approach, language has been broken down into smaller pieces and it is the learner who should synthesize the pieces for use in communication. These syllabi together with their classroom practices lead to an explicit way of teaching which was termed as focus on forms by Long (1991). But the presentation of discrete items does not have any resemblance to the way in which natural languages are acquired. As synthetic syllabi and teaching procedures did not work as they were supposed to, it led to an abandonment of focus on forms and resulted in a rush towards a single-minded focus on meaning (Long & Robinson, 1998). In this approach as it was suggested by Krashen (1985, as cited in Krashen, 1989) exposure to comprehensible target is sufficient for second and foreign language learners to become successful. Thus, a second kind of syllabus which was termed by Wilkins (1976, as cited in Long & Robinson, 1998) as "analytic syllabi" was introduced. According to Wilkins, "analytic approaches are organized in terms of the purposes for which people are learning language and the kinds of language performance that are necessary to meet those purposes" (p. 13).

But this approach suffered from a few problems. For example, it assumes older learners have the same capacity as young children to acquire a native language through exposure to its use, but there are some constraints on language learning (Long, 1990). Also, one of the biggest problems with this approach is that adult learners can become fluent speakers but not native-like speakers (Swain, 1991). Despite these problems, we are not limited to either a focus on forms or a focus on meaning approach nor are we limited to a synthetic versus an analytic approach (Willis, 1993). There is a third option that attempts to use the strengths of an analytic approach and also deals with its limitations, Focus on Form (FonF) (Long, 1991).

Long's interaction hypothesis, Swain's pushed output hypothesis, and Schmidt's noticing hypothesis provided the theoretical framework for the emergence of FonF to language teaching (Ellis, 2001; Ellis, et al., 2002; Loewen, 2004; Long, 1996; Schmidt, 2001; Swain, 1998). Long (1991, 1997) defines focus on form as an incidental attempt to draw learners' attention to any linguistic element in context, while maintaining a primary focus on meaning. There are different techniques to overcome learners' communication breakdowns or non-target like utterances. Some decide to offer corrective feedback or reactive FonF through various techniques, such as recast (Lyster, 1998, 2001). Alternatively, others may decide to raise attention to language while no error is present. This type of focus on form which can be initiated by either the teacher or the learners is termed as preemptive FonF (Ellis, 2001; Ellis et al., 2002; Loewen, 2004).

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

Three EFL teachers who were teaching in a language institute in Tabriz, Iran, and had almost the same experience level took part in this study. These teachers have been teaching for more than five years. They were teaching in both pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate classes. The teachers all had an M.A. degree in English. Two classes (one at pre-intermediate level and one at upper-intermediate level) of each of these teachers were chosen, so there were 6 classes, each of which had 15 students. The total number of students who participated was 90 (45 in each level). The students were all females and their age range was 15-40. In order to be sure about the

homogeneity and the level of all these six classes, the researchers used a standardized proficiency test for both levels.

3.2 Instrumentation

The interaction between the teachers and their students was observed and recorded through a small non-obtrusive MP4 recorder. To assist in categorizing and assigning teacher-learner interactions, a check list was also used to ensure a clear record of both groups of reactive and preemptive interactions in all classes.

In order to check the homogeneity and proficiency level of the classes, a standardized test, Preliminary English Test (PET), was administered to participants. This test is a proficiency test and includes four parts: reading, writing, listening and speaking. Because of practical limitations, just two parts, reading and writing, containing 40 questions, were administered.

3.3 Design

The method of this study was descriptive. One of the researchers attended all six classes, recorded the data and transcribed all the interactions between teachers and students. The variables of the study consisted of focus on form feedback, its types (reactive and preemptive), and students' proficiency levels (pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate).

3.4 Procedure

The researcher who attended all six classes, observed classroom interactions for five sessions in each class and sound recorded data for 30 sessions, half pre-intermediate level and half upper-intermediate level. Each class lasted for one and a half hours, so a total of 45 hours of instruction was observed and recorded. This procedure provided data relating to any interaction involving the teachers and the whole class. Interactions between learners in pairs or between the teachers and individual learners in pair works were not audible and so not captured for the analysis. All the analyzed data and quantification are solely based on the recorded interactions between the teachers and their learners, which were audible to all of the learners and recoverable for the raters. To provide certainty about inter rater reliability and classification of the data, two hundred and fifty samples (about 20%) of the total interactions were also analyzed by another teacher, who has an M.A. degree in English language teaching. The Spearman correlation coefficient of 1.0 was found as the inter-rater reliability of the two classifications.

4. Results

To ensure there was an observable difference between the levels of students, independent samples t-test for locating a significant difference between pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate levels in three pairs of classes through using PET test, Pair 1, $t(28) = -4.16$, $P = .00 < .05$; Pair 2, $t(28) = -6.73$, $P = .00 < .05$; Pair 3, $t(28) = -6.73$, $P = .00 < .05$, respectively, revealed that there is a significant difference between the PET scores of the pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate in three pairs of levels. Therefore, there exists a difference in their proficiency levels.

To test the significance of the hypotheses, an independent samples t-test was used. Two pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate groups were considered as two independent groups and the means of using focus on form episodes and its types (reactive and preemptive) in these two groups were compared separately through the above mentioned test. Alpha was set at the $p < .05$ level for all tests of significance.

4.1 Data analysis for Hypothesis 1

Null hypothesis 1: There is no difference in the frequency of L2 teachers' use of focus on form across different proficiency levels of learners (pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate).

As Table 1 and Figure 1 demonstrate, a total of 540 focus on form episodes were identified in intermediate levels, 123 in class one, 301 in class two and 116 in class three, respectively. In comparison, a total of 708 focus on form

episodes were identified in advanced levels, 261 in class one, 326 in class two, and 121 in class three, respectively. The frequency of focus on form episodes at the upper-intermediate level was more than that at the intermediate level.

Table 1
Focus on form episodes between pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate groups

CLASS		GROUP		Total
		Pre-inter.	Upper-inter.	
1	Count	123	261	384
	Expected Count	166.2	217.8	384.0
	% within GROUP	22.8%	36.9%	30.8%
2	Count		326	627
	Expected Count		15.7	627.0
	% within GROUP	55.7%	46.0%	50.2%
3	Count	116	121	237
	Expected Count	102.5	134.5	237.0
	% within GROUP	21.5%	17.1%	19.0%
Total	Count	540	708	1248
	Expected Count	540.0	708.0	1248.0
	% within GROUP	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

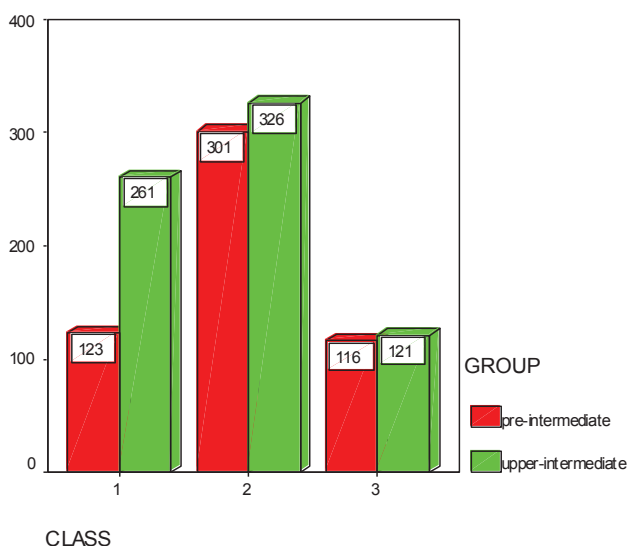


Figure 1. Bar graph comparing the frequency of focus on form episodes between pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate groups.

Independent t-test was used to clarify the significance of the difference shown in Table 1. As the results of the t-test in Table 2 indicates, where $t = -.92$ and $P = .40 > .05$, there is not a significant difference between the use of focus on form episodes in pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate groups. Therefore, the first null hypothesis was not rejected.

Table 2
Independent samples t-test for comparing the means of using focus on form episodes between pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate groups

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
VAR00004	Equal variances assumed	.131	.735	-.929	4	.400
	Equal variances not assumed			-.929	3.928	.406

4.2. Data analysis for Hypothesis 2

Null Hypothesis 2: There is no difference in the frequency of L2 teachers' use of reactive focus on form across different proficiency levels of learners (pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate).

As Table 3 and Figure 2 demonstrates, a total of 133 reactive LREs were identified in intermediate levels, 20 in class one, 65 in class two and 48 in class three, respectively. In comparison, a total of 84 reactive LREs were identified in advanced levels, 10 in class one, 45 in class two and 29 in class three, respectively. The frequency of reactive episodes at the pre-intermediate level was more than that at the upper-intermediate level.

Table 3
Reactive focus on form episodes across pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate levels of proficiency

			GROUP		
			Pre-inter.	Upper-inter.	Total
CLASS	1	Count	20	10	30
		% within GROUP	15.0%	11.9%	13.8%
	2	Count	65	45	110
		% within GROUP	48.9%	53.6%	50.7%
	3	Count	48	29	77
		% within GROUP	36.1%	34.5%	35.5%
Total	Count	133	84	217	
	% within GROUP	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

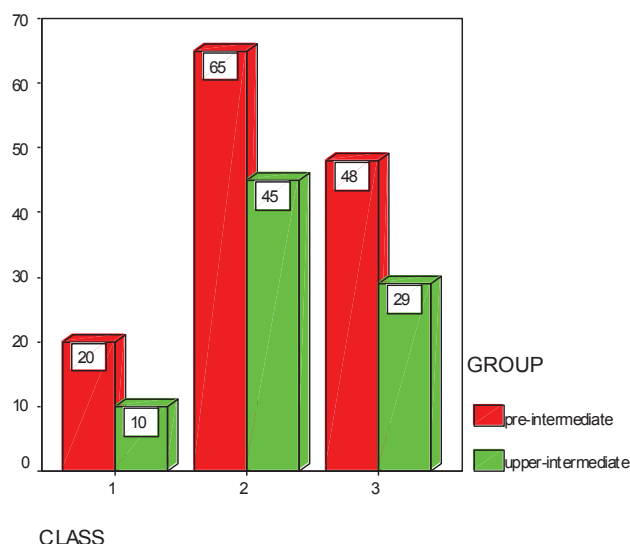


Figure 2. Bar graph comparing the frequency of reactive focus on form episodes between pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate groups.

Independent samples t-test was used to clarify the significance of the difference shown in Table 3. As the results of the t-test in Table 4 indicates, where $t = .98$ and $P = .38 > .05$, there is not a significant difference between the use of reactive focus on form episodes in pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate groups. Therefore, the second null hypothesis was not rejected.

Table 4

Independent samples t-test for comparing the means of using reactive focus on form episodes between pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate groups

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
REACTIVE	Equal variances assumed	.252	.642	.986	4	.380
	Equal variances not assumed			.986	3.757	.383

4.3 Data analysis for Hypothesis 3

Null Hypothesis 3: There is no difference in the frequency of L2 teachers' use of preemptive focus on form across different proficiency levels of learners (pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate).

As Table 5 and Figure 3 demonstrate, a total of 407 preemptive LREs were identified in intermediate levels, 103 in class one, 236 in class two and 68 in class three, respectively. In comparison a total of 624 reactive LREs were identified in advanced levels, 251 in class one, 282 in class two and 91 in class three, respectively. The frequency of preemptive episodes at the upper-intermediate level was more than that at the pre-intermediate level.

Table 5Preemptive focus on form episodes across pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate levels of proficiency

CLASS			GROUP		Total
			Pre-inter.	Upper-inter.	
1	1	Count	103	251	354
		% within GROUP	25.3%	40.2%	34.3%
	2	Count	236	282	518
		% within GROUP	58.0%	45.2%	50.2%
2	3	Count	68	91	159
		% within GROUP	16.7%	14.6%	15.4%
	Total	Count	407	624	1031
		% within GROUP	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

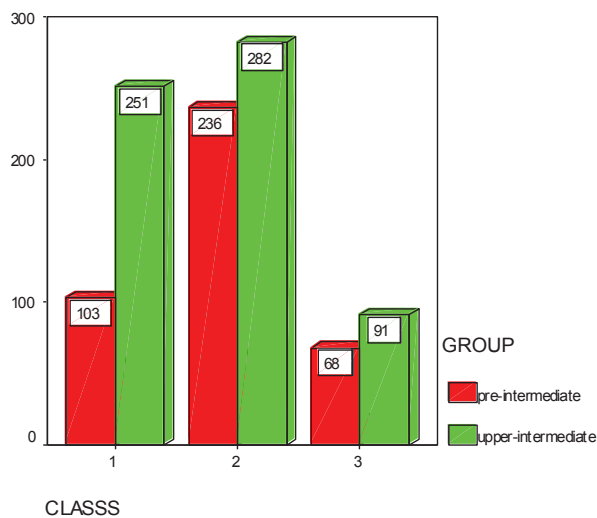


Figure 3. Bar graph comparing the frequency of preemptive focus on form episodes between pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate groups

Independent t-test was used to clarify the significance of the difference shown in Table 5. As the results of the t-test in Table 6 indicates where $t = -.92$ and $P = .4 > .05$, there is not a significant difference between the use of preemptive focus on form episodes in pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate groups. Therefore, the third null hypothesis was not rejected.

Table 6
Independent samples t-test for comparing the means of using preemptive focus on form episodes between pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate groups

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
PREEMPTI	Equal variances assumed	.131	.735	-.929	4	.405
	Equal variances not assumed			-.929	3.928	.406

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine incidental focus on form as it arose naturally in meaning-focused adult classes from the same language background in an EFL context, in Tabriz Iran. The first investigation in this study was to consider the difference in two proficiency levels, i.e. pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate, in their use of focus on form episodes. The investigation did not reveal a significant difference in these two levels.

The second part of the enquiry examined focus on form episodes in more detail and classified them as reactive and preemptive. In hypotheses two and three, the enquiry investigated each of these two kinds of focus on form across two different levels, pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate. According to independent t-test analysis, the difference in the frequency of reactive and preemptive focus on form was not significant across levels; thus, the second and third null hypotheses were not rejected.

A total of 1248 LREs were identified in 45 hours of meaning-focused lessons, a rate of almost one LRE every 2.1 minutes. The overall number of LREs in pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate levels was 540 and 708, respectively, demonstrating a difference in the frequency of LREs at two levels but this difference was not significant. In a similar study, Ellis et al. (2001a) identified 448 instances of focus on form in 12 hours in an ESL context (New Zealand) with language learners from multiple nationalities, mostly East Asian. In their study, the rate of focus on form episode (FFE) was every 1.6 minutes. There is also another study by Lyster (1998), who reported 558 FFEs in 18.5 hours of immersion instruction, a rate of one every 1.97 minutes. Lyster, however, only examined reactive LREs. Oliver (2000) found 614 teacher responses to erroneous learner turns (i.e., reactive focus on form) in four meaning-centered ESL lessons (two with adults and two with children). She did not mention the duration of the lessons, but from the descriptions provided, it is unlikely they exceeded 12 hours i.e., approximately one LRE per 1.2 minutes. Comparing the rate of the LREs in our EFL context with the studies mentioned above (Ellis, et al., 2001a; Lyster, 1998b; Oliver, 2000) conducted in ESL and immersion contexts, the frequency of focus on form is less.

However, the results of the present study are in line with other studies conducted in an Iranian EFL context. Farrokhi and Gholami (2007) reported 641 LREs in 20 hours of meaning-focused lessons, a rate of one LRE every 1.9 minutes. Baleghzadeh (2010) made a similar attempt in an Iranian EFL context and reported a surprising result of one LRE every 15 minutes.

A brief look at studies conducted in the Iranian EFL context, including the present study, and similar studies conducted in other contexts (ESL and immersion), makes obvious that there is a variety in the frequency of LREs not only across different contexts but also within the same context (Iranian EFL context). It was suggested by Farrokhi and Gholami (2007) that all these differences can be due to existing differences in teachers' attitudes towards teaching techniques, their education, and their experience level. Mackey, Polio and McDonough (2004), investigated the difference between experienced and inexperienced teachers in the frequency of LREs. The results of

their studies revealed that experienced teachers used much more focus on form episodes than inexperienced ones. In fact, inexperienced teachers did not use the opportunities to draw learners' attention to linguistic form as often as experienced ones did.

Baleghzadeh (2010) stated that the teachers in his study and Ellis et al.'s (2001a) were not much different in their education and experience level. Therefore, he attributed the differences in the frequency of LREs to learners' proficiency level, but this is not in line with the findings of the present study. As the results of the present study indicated, there was no difference in the frequency of L2 teachers' use of focus on form, including reactive and preemptive, across different proficiency levels of learners. Baleghzadeh's claim is compatible with William's (1999) study, which revealed more FonF episodes in more proficient learners' classes in an ESL context. This mixed result requires further studies conducted in both EFL and ESL contexts to clarify the contribution of the language learners' proficiency levels to the frequency of focus on form and its types (reactive and preemptive).

To conclude, the findings of this study is in line with two previous studies conducted by Farrokhi and Gholami (2007) and Baleghzadeh (2010) who revealed less frequency of FonF episodes, in an Iranian EFL context, in comparison with ESL and immersion contexts (Ellis et al., 2001a; Lyster, 1998; Oliver, 2000). Furthermore, in the present study, it was found that there were no significant differences in teachers' use of different kinds of focus on form in different levels of proficiency. Therefore, it can be concluded that EFL teachers teaching in different proficiency levels in Iran have the same attitude towards using focus on form and its types (reactive and preemptive), no matter what proficiency level they are teaching to.

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